

GRATUITY

T.D. Johnston

The couple in the second red booth was having an argument. The man, fortyish with slicked-back blond-white hair, was wearing an expensive charcoal overcoat. Even inside the restaurant. The red-haired woman, perhaps his wife and perhaps not, was listening and looking around. Listening and looking around. Shushing him. The man raised his voice. He said they weren't coming back to this restaurant. Not ever. Not ever, dammit. The woman whispered, loud enough for Hubert to hear, that the man was embarrassing her. To please stop it. To stop it for God's sakes. For God's sakes please stop it you're embarrassing me.

The man did not stop it. He said, and Hubert wasn't the only one who heard him, "If they want to advertise great service, then I have the right to advertise that they don't deliver on what they advertise."

Hubert thought it was odd, almost funny, that the man used the word "advertise" three times in one sentence. Maybe he could have used it once, and then could have said "I have the right to complain" and then "that they don't deliver on what they promise." But the man said "advertise" three times. Hubert didn't know whether to tell him or not. Maybe he would tell him. Maybe the woman would tell him. Yes. She could tell him: "For God's sakes, don't say the word three Times in one sentence. You're embarrassing me."

But the woman did not tell him that. She just said "You're impossible" and then she smiled, and then said she wanted a refill of her iced tea. The man said, and loud at that, "Maybe if we pitch freaking tents and get a good night's sleep, your iced tea will arrive in the morning." The woman laughed and told the man again how impossible he was.

She seemed to like his impossibility, or was it his impossibility? She held his hand now, and Hubert thought that was strange, almost funny, since the man embarrassed her and was impossible and used the same word three times in one sentence. Hubert didn't know whether to remind her of how embarrassed she was. He considered reminding her that less than a minute ago she was so embarrassed for God's sakes. He could say here's your unsweet tea ma'am and why are you holding the hand of a

man who is impossible and says words like advertise three times in one sentence.

Hubert approached the table.

"Would you like a refill of your tea, ma'am?"

The woman looked at the man and did a snort thing, a snorty laugh thing, like Hubert remembered doing in church when he was a kid and his sister whispered something funny and he was caught off guard and laughed through his nose snortily and after the service his dad smacked him in the head a bunch of times when they got to the car. Hubert considered smacking the woman in the head a bunch of times, but someone else was her dad and it wasn't Hubert and it wasn't the man in the overcoat.

The man picked up the woman's glass and rattled it back and forth, the ice cubes clinking the sides. Hubert worried that the man might crack the glass with all the rattling. "This week if you don't mind," said the man. The woman did the snorty thing again, and Hubert reached up and felt at the right side of his head, remembering his dad. When his dad smacked him that day for disrespecting the minister and God's house and God and Jesus and Mary, there was a smack for all five, not just one. You disrespected the *minister* (smack) and *God's house* (smack) and *God* and *Jesus* and *Mary* (yes, Hubert reflected, it had been five smacks). Again Hubert considered smacking the woman, but reminded himself that somewhere she had her own dad and it must be okay with him that she was with this impossible man for God's sakes. Hubert didn't think that her dad taught her the snorty laugh thing, but if he did it was his business and not Hubert's.

Hubert looked at the man and smiled. "Seven days is a long time, sir," said Hubert.

The man's face reddened. "What the hell did you just say to me, boy?"

The man held the glass up toward Hubert and rattled it again.

"I said I think I can get a refill of unsweet tea for the lady in less than a week, sir," Hubert said, accepting the glass from the man. "Probably a lot less. I pride myself on good service, and I'm not impossible. For God's sakes."

The woman gasped and then did the snorty thing again. She brought her open palms to her face.

The man in the charcoal overcoat said "You impertinent piece of..." and then said "I want to see your manager" and then said "You're through."

Hubert turned and walked to the beverage station behind the cash register, stepping around the fake ficus tree and its pose next to the sales counter. The ficus tree always bothered him in its ab-

sence of the need for water. He again considered saying so to the manager, but as the manager was not in at the moment, Hubert figured that he would simply replace the woman's unsweet tea this week rather than next, as requested by the impossible man.

There would be plenty of time for her to get another refill this week, but Hubert preferred promptness, and of course there was also plenty of time to pursue a living ficus tree for the restaurant. All in good time, he thought, and he must have his priorities in place. Maximum customer service was paramount. The manager liked to say "paramount." In order to provide maximum customer service and respect the word "paramount," Hubert selected two unwrinkled packets of Splenda to present to her in appropriate anticipation of her needs.

When Hubert arrived with the woman's refill, the man slapped his right palm on the table and said "We'll take the check."

But paramount customer service is what we advertise, Hubert thought. It's what we value. It's a core value, said the lady from the home office in Florida when she came in to train them last month. A core value, she said. There are five.

"Doesn't the lady want her refill of tea?" Hubert asked, extending the glass toward the woman.

"She wanted it yesterday, friend," said the man in the overcoat. "Now bring the check, please. See, Rhonda, I can be polite, even to people who steal my money with slow service and undercooked sirloins."

Hubert tried to remember whether he knew the man. It didn't seem that they were friends, but he reviewed his friends in his brain for a second or two, and came to the conclusion that whatever was causing the man to say "advertise" three times in a sentence was also plaguing the man's memory. And he had not seen the woman yesterday in the restaurant, or surely he would have provided her with a refill of unsweet tea then. Customer service was as paramount yesterday as today. That was the core value the Florida lady called Consistency. Maybe she sat in Margo's section yesterday. Yes, he thought. That must have been it. Maybe at one of the tables by the mirrors and the fake palm tree that didn't need water one bit more than the ficus did.

"I'm sorry that she didn't get it, sir."

The man stared at Hubert. "Get what?" He seemed annoyed.

"Her refill yesterday. I'll look into it for you."

Again the man's face grew dark.

"Listen, you wiseass. You mock me and I'll cut off your family jewels."

Hubert thought it was odd that the man would offer such a

deal, but it didn't seem fair, or even realistic, that the man would know where to find Hubert's family's jewels. His mother died four years ago.

"My mother died four years ago, sir. They were hers. I'm not mocking you, sir. I'm just trying to give you paramount service."

Hubert felt a little bit sick talking to the impossible man, especially when the woman snorted again as the man held his hands out wide and opened his mouth and shook his head. Hubert left to prepare the check. While he did so, he searched for a reason why the man would want to cut off Hubert's family's jewels. He didn't think there were many family jewels, but the main point was that the man was rude to say so. Rudeness and redundancy seemed to be the man's problems, so in that moment Hubert decided to help him.

Hubert brought the check to the table. The man wordlessly threw a Visa card onto the table, and Hubert just as wordlessly picked it up and went back to the cashier station to ring up the bill. He looked at the card. Richard W. Coxhead, it said. Richard W. Coxhead liked to say "advertise" three times in one sentence. Richard W. Coxhead thought that Hubert was an impertinent piece of something. Richard W. Coxhead dramatically, even wildly, overestimated how long it takes to prepare an unsweet tea. Versatile articulation, common sense and measurement were not Richard W. Coxhead's strengths, Hubert decided. Richard W. Coxhead was also impossible and embarrassed his wife or not his wife, but could make her snort with the best of them. That was one of Richard W. Coxhead's strengths. Not among his strengths was the fact that Richard W. Coxhead gave strange instructions like telling people to mock him, the deal being that he would cut off people's family jewels in return. An odd man was Richard W. Coxhead.

Yes, Hubert thought. He could help this man. He could help Richard W. Coxhead. Or was it Rick? Rich? Dick?

R.W.?

Hubert brought back the check and the man's credit card.

Hubert bowed. "It's been a pleasure to serve you, sir. Ma'am."

Richard W. Coxhead laughed, and the woman snorted.

Hubert was confused. He turned and walked back to the cashier station, his heart pounding. This had happened before, this sense of responsibility for others. Their laughter in response to his paramount customer service, especially when he dutifully delivered the lie about pleasure, a lie which the lady from Florida said was a virtue of paramount customer service, made him get that hot feeling again in his stomach. He owed them something, and yet he wasn't sure this time what it was.

The couple got up from the second red booth. The man buttoned his overcoat, and it occurred to Hubert that, oh yes, that was it, wearing the overcoat during lunch saved him from having to put it on as part of leaving. Smart, Hubert thought, to save a step. Hubert reflected that he had underestimated the man based strictly on his weaknesses in vocabulary and common sense and measurement, and that the man's ability to plan ahead was evidenced by the saved step of not having to put on his overcoat to go outside. The woman, on the other hand, had to make three attempts to swing her left arm into and through the left sleeve of the fur-trimmed black leather knee-length coat which she had folded next to her in the booth while eating. Remotely, Hubert considered that the man should have helped his wife or not his wife with the coat, and Hubert concluded that the woman must be his wife after all. If she was not his wife, and they were holding hands during lunch, then he would have helped her with her coat. Hubert was pretty sure of that.

The front door's bell tinkled when the couple stepped out into the cold afternoon air, and tinkled again when the door closed. Hubert went directly to the second red booth and picked up the signed credit-card receipt left behind by the man. The receipt was on top of the vinyl folder, the ball point pen spreading the paper open as if to make sure it could easily be read. The amount with tax said \$23.56. On the tip line, written in the blue ballpoint's ink, was a word, rather than numbers and decimals. The word was written in block letters. It said **NADA**.

Hubert stood staring down at the word. **NADA**. He looked over at the closed front door. He looked back at the word. He picked up the slip of paper, letting the ballpoint roll over on its right side, if it had a right side, which he briefly considered was possible but only if you were looking right at the letters **BIC** with the **B** sideways at the top and the **C** sideways at the bottom and only if you assumed that a pen is tall and thin rather than short and very wide.

NADA.

Hubert remembered the day a couple of years ago, December 27th to be exact, when a customer with red suspenders and a white dress shirt rolled up at the sleeves to halfway up the forearms had said to his friend, who was dressed the same except that his suspenders were black, that when you've had bad service the nickel tip is better than no tip because the nickel shows that you've thought about it. Hubert had barely heard him from behind the fake ficus tree, because the man was talking in low tones as if sharing a secret which only a few can know. The man

had gone on to explain to his associate that no tip at all can be dismissed as accidental oversight, but a nickel shows exactly what you thought of the service. So does a penny, he'd said, if you don't have a nickel, but don't use a quarter because then the server might just think you're unsuccessful.

Hubert wondered whether the man in the overcoat had ever met the man in the red suspenders.

* * *

That evening, Hubert turned the pages of the telephone book under the fluorescent light in the kitchenette. He ignored the argument between Hector and Rita in the efficiency next door, because once Rita told Hector that he screwed up again and was tired of him being such a something something loser, Hubert considered that he had heard all of this before, and after all it wasn't any of his business.

There were two Richard W. Coxheads in the telephone book. One was Richard W. Coxhead, Atty. The other was Richard W. Coxhead without the Atty. Hubert considered the likelihood that both Richard W. Coxheads were the Richard W. Coxhead who wore his charcoal overcoat to lunch, and that Richard W. Coxhead was a lawyer. He had also considered that Richard W. Coxhead might be bilingual, but since Hubert knew the meaning of **NADA** and Hubert was not bilingual, Hubert deduced that Richard W. Coxhead might not be bilingual either, which was okay of course, especially when Hector and Rita raised their voices and switched to Espanol whenever it got really heated and Rita yelled "Espanol por favor!".

Hubert stared at the telephone number for Richard W. Coxhead without the Atty. He wondered whether Rhonda would answer. Richard W. and Rhonda. In a nicer world it might have said Richard W. and Rhonda Coxhead and not Richard W. Coxhead in the telephone book. But that was none of his business.

If Rhonda answered, he would ask for Richard W. Coxhead. He didn't want to risk being wrong about Rick, or Rich, or Dick. He could also ask for the man of the house, but asking for the man of the house makes you sound like you don't know the man of the house, and Hubert felt that he knew Richard W. Coxhead, knew him well, better than Richard W. knew himself, and so he would not ask for the man of the house but rather he would ask for Richard W. Coxhead.

But then he remembered. Familiarity breeds trust. Rick. He should ask for Rick. If Richard W. Coxhead were a banker he might

be Rich or even Dick, but probably not Rick. But Rick the lawyer sounded right, and probably had always sounded right to Rhonda.

The phone rang in his ear. It rang again. And again. Then a click.

“Hello?” said a woman’s voice.

Hubert cleared his throat nervously. “Hello, Rhonda?”

“Who?”

“This is Hubert. Is the man of the house in?”

“What? The man of the house? Who is this?”

“I mean—I’m sorry. Is Rick available?”

“There’s no Rick here. Do you mean Rich? Who *is* this?”

“This is Hubert, Rhonda. I was your server today. At Mia’s Café and Grille?”

Hubert wasn’t sure why he said it as a question, but he was nervous. After several silent seconds, he thought that the call had been disconnected, because the silence seemed long and loud. But then she spoke.

“I wasn’t at Mia’s today. And my name isn’t Rhonda. Rhonda is Rich’s administrative assistant. Why—why are you calling here? Did something happen to Rich?”

“I didn’t give them paramount service, Mrs. Coxhead. Today. At Mia’s. It was my fault with Rhonda’s unsweet tea. I don’t know how I missed it.”

The woman seemed very quiet. Hubert wondered whether he had ever served her at Mia’s.

“Have you ever been to Mia’s, Mrs. Coxhead?”

This time she answered quickly, and quietly.

“I have been to Mia’s.”

“We pride ourselves on paramount service. I owe Rich. Rhonda too. I was thinking that I could bring a half gallon of unsweet tea to your house so maybe Rhonda could have some and Rich could change the Nada to a—”

“Rich proposed to me at Mia’s.”

Hubert wasn’t sure that Mrs. Coxhead was talking to him. He decided to ask a question, just to check.

“Why did he do that?”

“What?”

“Why did he—”

“Because he loved me! He loved me! He wanted to spend the rest of his, his—”

Suddenly Mrs. Coxhead was crying. Hubert had heard his mother cry just like this when he was a boy. There was a low hum, followed by a staccato of in-breaths, followed again by the low hum, and then sniffles, before starting all over again.

Hubert considered the fake ficus tree and the fake palm tree. "He loved you and he brought you to Mia's? Was that before I started working there?"

"Was that before— why would I know that? Why did you call here?" And the crying set in again. Hubert felt a smidgeon awkward, like he did when he walked into the living room when he was eleven and saw his father giving his mother some what for. At least that's what his father had called it. His mother was crying like Mrs. Coxhead, and his father said during the smacks, "Look at him *again* and I'll give *you* some *more* what *for*." And his mother had cried like Mrs. Coxhead. Low hum, bunch of in-breaths with no out-breaths, and then lots of sniffles and then one really big out-breath that also was the start of another long low hum. But neither his mother nor his father had seen him, and he stayed frozen in the foyer with the awkwardness until he figured out he should run outside and play with Starkey White like his dad always told him he should do because Starkey was a good baseball player and Hubert's father wished Hubert could be more like Starkey. *More like Starkey.*

Hubert decided that Mrs. Coxhead must want to talk to him, because she was still crying and still on the phone.

"Does Rich speak Spanish, Mrs. Coxhead?"

She stopped sniffing.

"Why would you ask me that?"

"Well. Instead of a number, like dollars and cents, he wrote Nada."

"The word?"

"Yes. It means nothing."

"I know what it means. It means something."

Hubert was confused. He decided to confirm that it means something.

"It means nothing, Mrs. Coxhead."

"It means *everything*. It means he's an asshole. And you have ruined my life by calling me. *Ruined it!* I don't know what to do."

Hubert was unsure why her life was ruined by a telephone call.

"Why have I ruined your life, Mrs. Coxhead?"

"Because my husband is having an affair."

"I ruined your life because your husband is having an affair?"

Hubert was terribly confused.

"You ruined my life by telling me."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Coxhead."

Silence.

"Mrs. Coxhead?"

Silence.

“Mrs. Coxhead, I would like to take this unsweet tea to Rhonda. Do you know where I might find her? I need my gratuity.”

“At this hour, who knows where you would find that, that, that—”

“Administrative assistant?”

Silence.

“Maybe I could drop it off at her office. Mrs. Coxhead?”

“He said he was working late. My God, what am I going to do?” She started crying again.

“I have the office address, if Rhonda is Mr. Coxhead’s administrative assistant. Maybe I can drop off the unsweet tea there, Mrs. Coxhead. Do you think they will give me my gratuity if I do that? I’m worried about my rent. Failing to provide paramount service cost me a tip, and I need twenty-five tips a day to pay the rent. You see, that’s before I pay the power bill. That’s five tips a day, just that, Mrs. Coxhead. They let me eat at the restaurant, and three tips a day is for gas in my car. Did you know that my car has gone over two hundred thousand miles, Mrs. Coxhead? Mrs. Coxhead? Mrs. Coxhead, are you okay?”

Hubert heard another snuffle, followed by “I have to go now. I wish you hadn’t called. You should have minded your own business.”

“This is my business, Mrs. Coxhead.”

Silence. Hubert waited for a snuffle. None came. She was gone. Unless she was just testing him. No. She was gone.

Hubert considered going to Mrs. Coxhead’s house to see whether she was okay. He didn’t want to have ruined her life, since that wasn’t his business. But paramount service was. He could leave the unsweet tea at the Coxheads’ house with Mrs. Coxhead, and then maybe she could front him the tip if her husband wasn’t home. But on the other hand, the tip wasn’t her responsibility, and besides, Hubert hadn’t earned it yet.

Better to take the unsweet tea directly to Rhonda. Especially if she and Richard W. Coxhead were still working.

* * *

Hubert parked his rusty old silver Gremlin under a streetlight at the corner of Platt Street and Faber Avenue. He walked down the tree-lined street to 811 Faber Avenue, the address of Burke and Coxhead, Attorneys at Law.

Lights were on inside. The front door was closed, but opened with a twist of the knob. He entered. Nobody was in the reception area, so he walked on past the front counter and down

the hallway behind it, toward a light emanating from beneath a closed door.

He stopped at the door when he heard music. Soft jazz, it seemed. He touched the handle of the door and turned it. He opened the door and stopped.

Richard W. Coxhead was on top of, it looked like, yes it was, it was Rhonda. His pants were down around his ankles as he appeared to be on the verge of falling off of the desk while somehow staying stuck on the woman. The woman was making noises that Hubert had heard other women make when he watched movies on cable in his efficiency and that one time when that lady from the third red booth asked him if he dated and he said he didn't know and she said she wanted to find out and they went to that place that rented rooms by the hour on Cannon Street.

Hubert decided to take a closer look at Richard W. Coxhead and Rhonda. He especially thought he might be able to help in some way. He owed it to Richard W. Coxhead. And maybe even to Rhonda, though the important thing was that he knew that he owed her a refill of unsweet tea.

He stepped closer. Richard W. Coxhead said something to God. He sounded earnest. The telephone rang.

Hubert said, "I'll get it."

Rhonda screamed as Richard W. Coxhead fell backward onto his knees and scrambled to his feet. The phone rang again as Hubert kept his promise. He picked up the receiver from the side of the desk and waved at Richard W. Coxhead and Rhonda, nodding his head in reassurance. "I've got it," he said as he raised the phone to his ear. "Don't let me interrupt what you were doing."

"Hello?" he said into the phone as Richard W. Coxhead waved his arms wildly and shook his head back and forth with vigor.

"Rich!" said the voice on the phone. "Why haven't you answered? I've been calling!"

Hubert recognized the voice immediately. "Mrs. Coxhead?" said Hubert, as Rich approached him, mouth wide open and yammering silently, both hands reaching for the phone as Rhonda rolled off of the desk and crawled toward the black leather sofa on the opposite side of the room.

"Mrs. Coxhead?" Hubert said again when he encountered silence at the other end.

Silence. But he heard her breathing. It was coming in short puffs.

"I want to speak with my husband."

Hubert considered that this might not be a good time for Mrs. Coxhead to talk with her husband.

“Mrs. Coxhead, Rich is a bit indisposed at the moment. And I have brought Rhonda her unsweet tea.”

Richard W. Coxhead was waving his arms.

“Yes, Rich?”

Richard W. Coxhead stopped waving his arms and whispered, hissed really, “We’re working late. Tell her we’re working late and I’ll be home in about an hour. Tell her!”

Hubert watched Richard W. Coxhead and Rhonda as they got dressed, all four of their hands shaking, sort of like when Hubert was trying to ring up a bill, get more water for a table, and turn in an order to the kitchen, all in ten seconds. It made his hands shake to do everything at once. Richard W. Coxhead was watching Hubert with his head, and trying to put his socks on while pulling up his pants at the same time. Richard W. Coxhead’s hands were shaking with the impossibility of putting socks on and pulling pants up at the same time. That was why his hands were shaking.

“Rich wants me to tell you he’ll be home in about an hour,” Hubert said into the phone. “He and Rhonda are getting dressed.”

Hubert didn’t see Richard W. Coxhead coming, because he was listening to Mrs. Coxhead, who really did cry a lot for a grown woman. But he did hear him use a swear word as Richard W. Coxhead ripped the phone away from Hubert and then hit Hubert in the head with it. Hubert fell back a couple of steps, and reached up to feel his head, which hurt. His fingers were wet when he withdrew them from his head. The man had hit him right in the spot where his father always did, only this time it wasn’t for snorting in church.

The hot sick feeling came back to Hubert’s stomach as he listened to Richard W. Coxhead talk into the phone.

“This bastard just barged into my office without notice. We were working on the Carlyle file, and this loon comes in, and get this baby, he was our freaking waiter today, and there’s something wrong with him, and I love you, and I can’t wait to get home if I can just get the Carlyle file wrapped up here and—”

Hubert shot Richard W. Coxhead with the gun he had used to kill his father twelve years, two months and six days ago. The former Richard W. Coxhead collapsed to the floor, bleeding from his left temple, the phone still in his left hand.

Hubert bent down to pick up the phone. Rhonda screamed, sitting in the corner, hugging herself. Hubert put the phone to his ear.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Coxhead. I have unsweet tea for Rhonda. I have to go.”

Hubert hung up the phone on its base on the desk, and turned toward Rhonda. He removed the unsweet tea from his bag and

handed it to her. Her hands were still shaking, because she wasn't finished getting dressed, her face registering what he hoped was gratitude for the refill of unsweet tea, but he wasn't so sure. He wondered whether she would offer the gratuity. Getting no response aside from another scream, he turned to leave.

Service had been delivered. He had remained consistent, just as he had always been. The lady from Florida would have been proud.

Rhonda's voice stopped him. It was a hoarse whisper, but unmistakably Rhonda. Besides, there was nobody else there. Hubert turned.

"Why, Hubert? Why did you do that? Was it—was it the tip?"

Hubert considered the Nada. He considered the man in the red suspenders two years ago. He considered his father. He considered his mother.

"No, Rhonda. It wasn't. I didn't give you paramount service, and Richard W. Coxhead wrote Nada on the check. That's fair, I guess. No ma'am, not the tip."

"Wh—what, then?"

Hubert considered again. He liked Rhonda, even if she did like men who were impossible and embarrassed her and used the same word in a sentence three times. And then he knew.

"It was like the man in the red suspenders said, Rhonda. Leave a nickel, so they'll know you thought about it. I thought about it. Richard W. Coxhead lied to Mrs. Coxhead. He didn't lie to me, and he didn't lie to you. But he lied to Mrs. Coxhead, and so I had to give him some what for."

Hubert stood there and looked at Rhonda.

"Would you like some what for, Rhonda?"

Rhonda stared, mouth agape, around the room, her eyes growing dull as they moved from the desk to the computer to the phone and over toward the outer office and beyond, and then looked at Hubert's eyes. When she spoke, her voice was soft, but firm.

"Yes."